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Are your clients ready for nutrition?

Employees: Finding and keeping the best

Which management style suits you?

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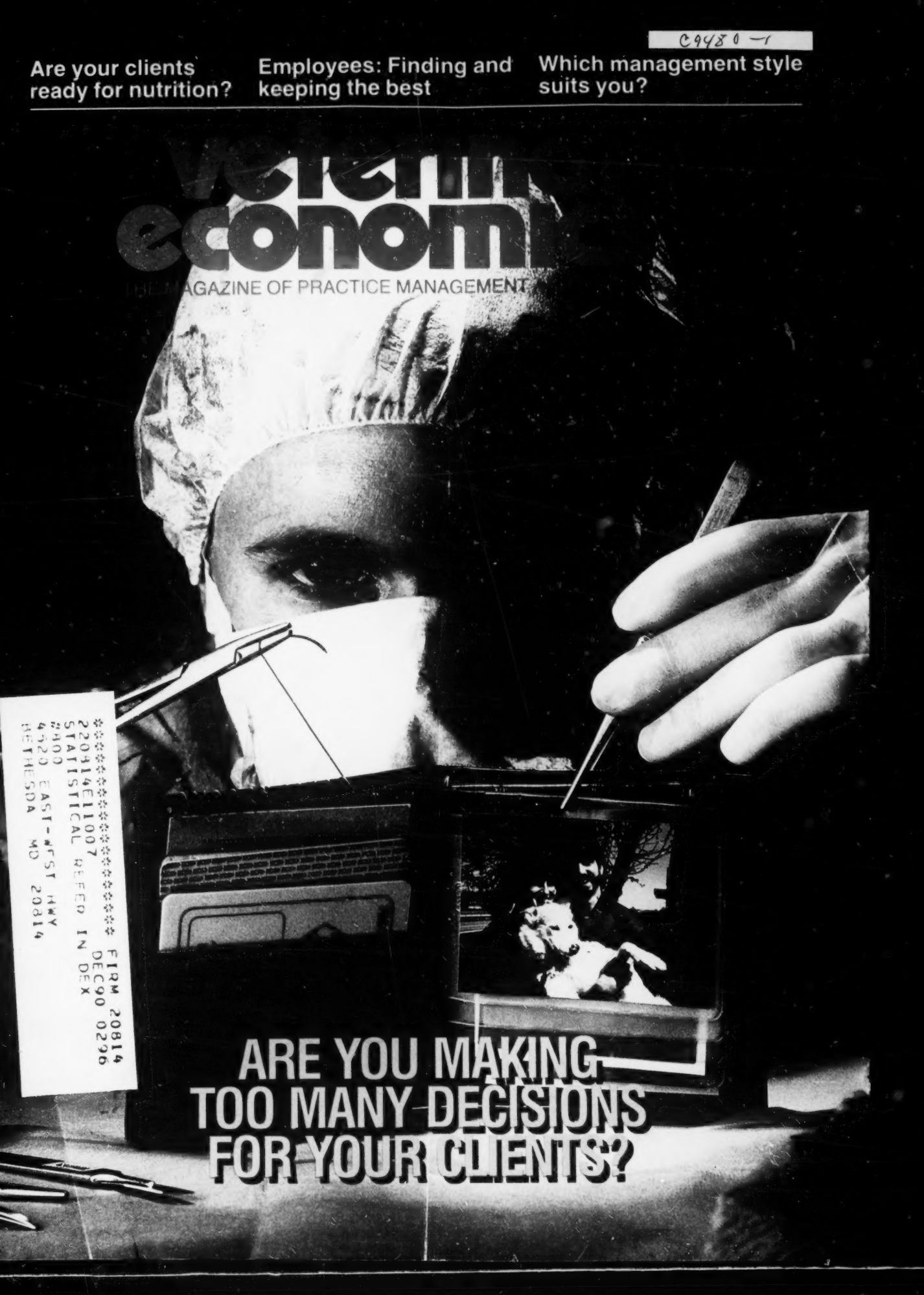
THE MAGAZINE OF PRACTICE MANAGEMENT



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## ARE YOU MAKING TOO MANY DECISIONS FOR YOUR CLIENTS?

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MAY 1990

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# MEMO FROM THE EDITOR

## Changing the surgery site

Yes, the veterinarian on the cover is performing surgery on a client's wallet. I suspect he'd rather be operating on the client's pet, but chances are, he didn't recommend that option because he figured the client wouldn't pay for it anyway. He probably doesn't know it, but every time he decides what clients don't want, he sews up another wallet.

Now, before you chastise him (or me) for a preoccupation with money, let's consider what else he's doing: He is denying the client and the patient the full benefit of his expertise, and he is denying himself and his family a decent income. If you still don't like the reference to money, then think only about what can happen to an animal when its doctor doesn't discuss what it truly needs.

From what I can tell, *medicine* is the answer to your profession's prayers. Almost every other aspect of practice brings with it the "should-I-or-shouldn't-I" doubts, whether we're talking about product sales or advertising. Medicine, on the other hand, is the arena in which you can shine, and in which there is no question that you know best. No matter what a nice person you think you're being by making decisions for your clients, you serve them better with the confidence and skills that come with your degree.

After you read Don Dooley's cover story, try what he says. If your clients kick and scream and refuse your recommendations, what's the worst that can happen? You can resort to the treatment you would have offered in the first place. But wouldn't you rather be sewing up animals than wallets?

Becky Turner

Rebecca R. Turner


veterinary economics

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A Medical Economics Publication

# ARE YOUR CLIENTS READY FOR NUTRITION?

Your colleagues say yes—clients *are* receptive to nutritional advice for their pets and are eager to learn more. Are you providing the information and services to meet their needs?

By Rebecca Gants, SPECIAL ASSIGNMENTS EDITOR

*Percent of veterinarians who provide nutritional counseling:*

**86**.....

How will you distinguish your practice in the 1990s? Two buzzwords come to mind: *service* and *prevention*. With clients demanding service, it only makes sense to educate them about the long-term advantages of preventive health care for their animals. And, with an estimated 25 to 45 percent of all dogs and 20 percent of all cats overweight, nutrition is a good place to start.

"Proper diet comes under the heading of medicine," stresses Dr. James Weiss of Atlanta. "Outlining the nutritional needs of a pet is just as important as placing it on a routine vaccination schedule." Dr. Weiss, owner of a two-doctor small animal practice, is not alone in his opinion. About 86 percent of the respondents to a recent VETERINARY ECONOMICS survey say they offer nutritional counseling to their clients; most say they began emphasizing this service within the past two years.

Are clients listening to the doctors' advice? Respondents say yes. In fact, 20 percent say that their clients are very receptive. Another 74 percent say that their clients are somewhat receptive to nutrition-related information for their pets. While not every client is willing to pay the price, very few turn a deaf ear to the subject. More than 90 percent of the respondents say that clients are ready to learn more about their pets' nutritional needs.

THE AUTHOR, a business and financial writer, has covered the veterinary profession for 15 years.

### Getting the word out

How do your colleagues communicate the connection between a proper diet and a healthy animal? About 32 percent of the doctors surveyed say they use printed informational materials. Four percent use audiovisual aids, 7 percent offer a clinic newsletter, and another 6 percent utilize such tools as waiting-room displays, samples, and computerized reminders. But the majority—52 percent—rely primarily upon face-to-face communication between client and doctor, whether the conversation takes place in the exam room or in the feedlot.

"Most literature gets thrown away anyway," says Dr. David Majchrzak, an associate at Lemay

*Percent of veterinarians who say their clients are "very" or "somewhat" receptive to nutritional information and products:*

**94**

*Percent of veterinarians who think clients are becoming more receptive to nutritional information:*

**91**.....

Animal Hospital in St. Louis, Mo. He says that the predominantly blue-collar clients of the four-doctor companion animal practice wouldn't sit still for client education videos, so the doctors do most of the talking about preventive medicine.

"This practice is 39 years old, but there was not a lot of emphasis on client education until two years ago," says the 1986 University of Missouri graduate. "A lot of old ideas are still floating around. For example, pets in this vicinity are prime targets for heartworms because we're located along a river. A typical client conversation goes like this:

Client: Heartworms aren't a problem because my dog never goes out of the yard.

Doctor: Well, If you've discovered a method to keep mosquitoes out of your yard, please share it with me, because mosquitoes spread heartworm disease.

Client: Oh, I see."

"After an explanation," Dr. Majchrzak concludes, "the client is receptive to heartworm testing and prevention for his or her pet. Within the past 2½ years, heartworm treatments have decreased by 50 percent in this practice."

On the nutrition side, Dr. Majchrzak treats most of the diabetic patients at the hospital. "Finding out your pet has diabetes is a shock to most clients," he says. "I've found the best approach for any type of client education is to compare the pet's problem with the same situation in people. Clients quickly overcome their anxiety and are more apt to treat their pets for diabetes when they learn that I, too, am a diabetic.

"We have a 75-percent success rate with client compliance in treatment with insulin and diet, because they feel their pets are in good hands. I'm proof that a normal life is possible for a diabetic."

Dr. Majchrzak admits that his enthusiasm wanes a little when he speaks to a client with an obese pet. "Unfortunately, too much client education comes after the fact," he says. "You are skating on thin ice when discussing nutrition for the heavy pet, particularly if the client is also overweight. In that situation, I focus strictly on the medical reasons why the pet should lose weight—to avoid joint problems and heart and kidney diseases."

Dr. Majchrzak and the other doctors at Lemay Animal Hospital discuss nutrition with clients during each young pet's first visit, outlining a life-long plan for good health. "The results are subtle, but we've been seeing a lot more young animals at the practice," he says. "As our clients become more aware of what veterinary medicine has to offer, we get fewer requests to put animals to sleep when treatment is possible."

### Sharing the expertise

"Clients like their doctors to be well-informed," says Dr. Jim Weiss of Atlanta. "Nutritional services prove that you're keeping up with the latest information.

"From an economical stand-

point, feeding a good diet and following preventive-care guidelines makes sense. Clients learn that their pets' medical problems are less expensive to prevent than to treat," says the 1957 University of Georgia alumnus.

"Surprisingly, most clients bring up the topic of nutrition as their pets approach middle-age. People are used to annual physicals for themselves. They appreciate careful questioning on our part to evaluate potential health risks for their pets. My job is to tell these clients how devastating an improper diet can be for the aging animal."

Built-in scales in his exam tables allow Dr. Weiss to monitor each patient's weight over time. "If we notice a pet is getting heavier, we casually question whether the owner has added table food or treats to the pet's diet," he says. "I don't sell pet food; we handle only the prescription medical diets. But nutrition is really not a hard sale with our clientele. They are well-versed in medical procedures and willing to do anything within reason for the health of their pets."

For the past 10 years, Dr. Weiss has offered geriatric exams, consisting of a chest X-ray, EKG, urinalysis, blood profile, and exam, costing up to $150. His $25 office call includes nutritional consultation; guided tours are complimentary when time permits.

"I answer clients' questions without oversimplifying," he says. "Clients feeding puppies OTC dog food see immediate re-



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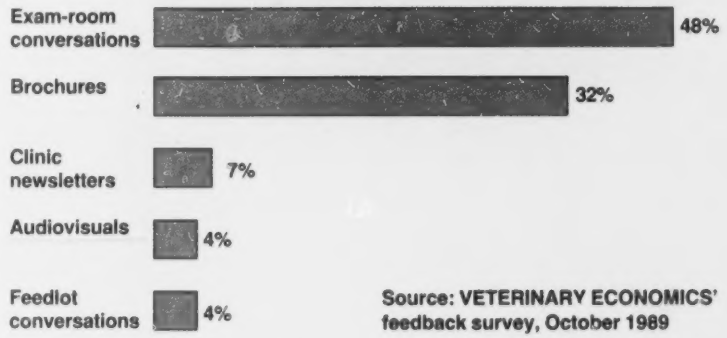
**How do you present nutritional information to your clients?**




**Source: VETERINARY ECONOMICS' feedback survey, October 1989**

## NUTRIMENT FOR THOUGHT

In a recent VETERINARY ECONOMICS survey, we asked your colleagues, "Do you feel nutritional services have improved your practice?" Most of the more than 80 respondents—87 percent—said yes. When we asked *how* nutritional services improve a practice, many doctors told us that such services result in "improved animal health and increased sales." They also mentioned that nutritional services:

- allow you to offer better, more complete service to clients.
- promote better management of longstanding illness—diabetes, heart failure, renal disease, and so on.
- help clients realize that you care for their animals' welfare.
- decrease the incidence of disease.
- lead to better-informed clients with healthier pets.
- increase sales of biologicals, since preventive medicine is more cost-effective.
- let clients know that you are current on medical techniques and knowledge.
- provide clients a much-needed service.
- increase rapport between veterinarians and clients.
- increase client loyalty; one-stop shopping is more convenient.

sults when they switch to a premium brand. Within four to six weeks, they are happy that house training is easier because the animals produce less fecal matter, their coats are smooth with a high sheen, and they're no longer weak in the carpal joint."

### Getting a foothold

Client compliance isn't always so readily attainable, says Dr. Rebecca Whitehead, who owns a mixed animal practice in Tallassee, Ala., 35 miles east of Montgomery. "After growing up in the mountains of rural North Carolina, I assumed opening a practice this close to a metropolitan area would be preferable. The biggest surprise was how uneducated clients are about the basics of veterinary medicine. Preventive health care is a never-ending struggle.

"There's little hope when you are dealing with folks who have been feeding their animals table scraps for the past 20 to 30 years," the 1980 Auburn graduate says. "I have more success with younger couples for whom the pet temporarily serves as a surrogate child. I dispense prescription diets as an alternative to surgery in the face of life-threatening, irreversible situations. Clients are much more receptive to this approach. If the problem recurs, they know we have done everything possible for the pet. Quite simply, it's a matter of convincing them that prevention and a proper diet offer protection of the investment they have in their animals."

Dr. Whitehead uses dietary control for better management of such long-standing illnesses as diabetes, heart failure, and renal disease. For clients with pointers and setters, Dr. Whitehead stresses the benefits of good nutrition in field trial performance.

"Repeating basic information gets very tiresome, but I've learned you can't prejudge clients," she says. "You must give every client the opportunity to provide the best care for his or her pet, because you would never guess that the client with worn jeans and a beat-up pickup truck could be an 'A' client. Once in a while you get a nice surprise."

Although Dr. Whitehead quickly admits that she isn't fond of public speaking, she never turns down an interview on the local radio station, a speech to the local Rotary, or a guest column for the newspaper. "I always make a point of accepting these invitations," she says. And she's not about to give up the battle: "Take advantage of every opportunity, even if this means educating clients one at a time."

### Banning table scraps

Dr. David Burba of Altoona, Fla., 30 miles north of Orlando, uses educational pamphlets and newsletters to help educate his mobile clientele of senior citizens. "I like to send something home for the client to read," says the 1987 Auburn graduate. "But direct mail is tough with a seasonal clientele. Basically, you resort to nonstop chatter to convince the clients about preventive medicine." ▶

***Percent of veterinarians who say nutritional services have "improved" their practices:***

**87**

Dr. Burba says that convincing his clients to feed pet food rather than table scraps is the first hurdle. "Everyone likes to buy the blue-light special at K-Mart," he says. "I tell clients that premium brands may cost more, but they will feed less food and see fewer health problems in their pets. Once I educate clients about the fats and by-products in dog foods, they start asking questions and comparing data—then they switch brands.

"Sometimes comparing the cost of treatment to the economy of prevention is tough to get across to senior citizens. And I know they double-check my advice with their veterinarians when they return north in the summer. Follow-up is difficult when I see the pet infrequently. So when a pet comes in with a health problem, I always mention that if we could turn the page back for a second look, preventive measures would have eliminated this problem. The client may deny that preventive dollars would have been well-spent, but I always point out the amount of money they're now spending to solve the problem.

"This makes them feel a little guilty about neglecting their pets, but this tactic also makes them think. As a result, they are more receptive for future care."

Dr. Burba also counts hunters among his clientele. "In the past, a puppy's death was no big deal," he says. "Now they realize the value of preventive care. If I mention a procedure to two or three hunters, the word spreads like wildfire, and the entire hunting community is buzzing by the end of the week.

"A local businessman was known to raise super-skinny, black-and-tan coon hounds. After adopting a deworming routine, he is very pleased with the changes. His dogs are healthier, look better, and their hunting performance has improved. What's more, they don't require as much food. This type of turnaround gains attention."

### Achieving successful results

Of the surveyed veterinarians who offer nutritional counseling, 87 percent report that nutritional services have improved their practices—whether the yardstick is pet-food sales volume or satisfied clients. A random sampling of the written responses reveals an Idaho doctor who equates increased sales figures with a definite improvement in the health of patients. A Missouri veterinarian reports that he began nutritional counseling three years ago and is now finding that his patients are closer to their proper weights, with better skin conditions and fewer health problems.

Also among the respondents: A Texas feline practitioner who for the past 30 years has kept an eye on her patients' dietary needs, convincing her clients that better nutrition means fewer veterinary bills. As Dr. David Burba of Altoona, Fla., says, "Clients quickly realize that preventive medicine is much more cost-effective in the long run." ■



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